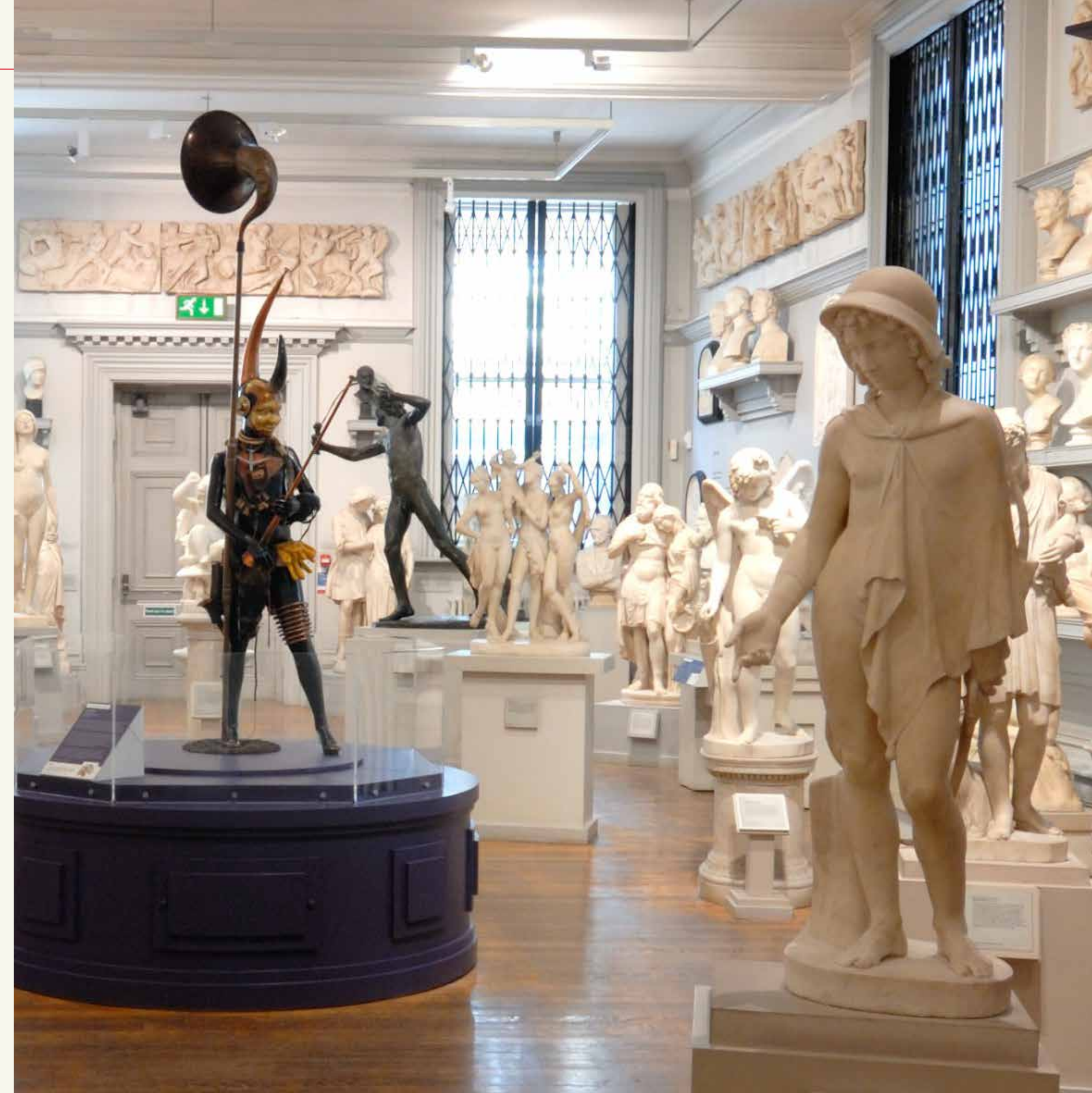


MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES



DELIVERING SOCIAL JUSTICE WITH OUR COMMUNITIES



Museums make us healthier and happier and increase our wellbeing. They make us proud of where we live, and they inspire, motivate and challenge us.

At a time when we are facing increasing polarisation and challenging issues such as the climate crisis and growing inequality, museums can play a role in delivering social justice, bringing us and our communities together, actively breaking down barriers and fostering conversation and reflection.

Museums across the UK are doing this by working with community partners, listening to and acting on their priorities, and setting common goals to achieve more inclusive and equitable spaces. These partnerships mean that museums of all sizes are using their spaces and collections to make a positive difference to people's lives by working collaboratively with community groups, health charities and other third-sector organisations.

However, we also need to recognise that museums and their collections can sometimes be excluding and painful places. Embedding the MA's decolonisation principles, being actively anti-discrimination, and working with marginalised communities

to understand and overcome barriers to access and engagement can help open our museums to all.

The Museums Association (MA) is supporting museums to develop their role as socially-purposeful organisations through guidance, awards, professional development and funding. Social justice work can help museums become more sustainable and generates community benefits that make a strong case for the importance of public investment in our museums.

Whether it's supporting climate justice through taking a sustainable approach to design, build and procurement at National Museums Scotland; bringing communities together through Hastings Museum's co-produced Refugee Buddy Project, or exploring historical links with slavery at Paxton House, museums and their communities across the UK are helping to create a positive and lasting difference.



President's introduction

How did you feel the last time you walked out of a museum? Did your experience help you connect, reflect and feel part of something bigger? And did you leave that museum with new stories, ideas and renewed energy?

We all know the power that museums have in people's lives. They help people feel like they belong in a particular place, support our health and wellbeing, and to make sense of an ever-changing and often confusing world.

The MA is committed to helping everyone working in and with museums to respond to the needs of our communities, whether local, from further afield – or even virtual.

Whatever the size of museum or the nature of its collections, we firmly believe that museums can provide an unrivalled catalyst for change, helped by the fact that museums are some of the most treasured and trusted institutions in society today.

Museums can be a force for good in tackling many of the most pressing challenges of our time, from social isolation and inequality within our communities, to the climate and environmental crises. However, we must acknowledge that museums are not static, and we can all take positive steps to ensure that our museums are as inclusive and welcoming as possible for everyone, continually evolving to meet the needs of our visitors and users.

Our relaunched Museums Change Lives hopes to support the sector in its ongoing mission and I hope that you will find it an inspiration in delivering meaningful change and social justice.

Steve Miller

*Director of culture and heritage
at Norfolk County Council, and president,
Museums Association*



“We are continually seeing the fantastic contribution that museums make towards building more connected and socially responsible communities. By working with our communities using our collections and Museums Change Lives as a starting point we can truly make a difference to the areas in which we live, work and visit.”

Rachael Rogers

Museums and arts manager at MonLife Heritage Museums, and vice president, Museums Association



Enhancing health and wellbeing

Museums enhance our quality of life and help improve our mental and physical health.

What this looks like:

Equity in partnerships: museums work in partnership with communities and health and wellbeing organisations to support the wellbeing of a diverse range of people.

Authentic participation: participation in the work of the museum promotes wellbeing and self-confidence and broadens the knowledge and horizons of participants, the museum and the wider public.

Addressing inequality: museums recognise health inequalities and strive to overcome them by working with specialist health organisations and a wide range of people and communities.

Wellbeing for all: museums support the wellbeing of everyone who works in and with them including staff, freelancers and volunteers.

Minimising harm: museums recognise that they are not safe places for everyone and take measures to minimise harm in displays, programming and interpretation.

Creating better and more equitable places to live and work

Museums help us to value the places where we live, work and visit.

What this looks like:

Climate justice: museums work together with communities to raise awareness of the climate crisis and to protect the environment.

Belonging: museums help to create a sense of belonging and empowerment by engaging with communities and encouraging active public participation in decision-making.

Inclusion: museums use engagement, learning and collections to generate understanding within and between different groups in society and work to actively tackle racism, ableism and discrimination.

Accessibility: museums work in equal partnerships with community groups, charities and other organisations to create civic spaces that are open and accessible to all.



Inspiring engagement, debate and reflection

Museums work with the public as active and creative participants – using collections as a starting point for exchanging opinions, experiences, ideas and knowledge.

What this looks like:

Reflection: museums help us to understand and negotiate the complex world around us, encouraging us to reflect and take action on contemporary challenges such as racism, discrimination, poverty and the climate crisis.

Debate: museums work with community partners to research collections, to challenge assumptions, foster debate and motivate people to contribute to positive change in the world. They are not neutral spaces.

Inspiration: museums inspire learning and creativity for all and work actively to ensure that a wide range of people can access these opportunities at any stage in life.

ENHANCING HEALTH AND WELLBEING



Shingley Art Gallery, Recovery Through Ceramics

Recovery Through Ceramics works with people in recovery to develop new creative and practical skills.

Many of the participants had not been to the Shingley before or were not regular visitors to cultural centres. The programme is funded through an NHS Mental Health Transformation grant and is delivered in partnership with lived experience recovery organisation Recovery Connections and Bensham Grove Pottery.

Participants work with ceramicists to learn different techniques and create their own pieces, exploring the Shingley's ceramic collection for inspiration for their own work. Through activities designed to give them ownership over their programme, participants co-curated a two-week exhibition of their work at the Shingley and co-curated a display of work from the gallery's ceramic collection in its new community cabinet.

Evaluation has shown that the programme increases confidence and wellbeing while promoting peer support and resilience. Participants also develop new personal and professional skills through practical research and interpretation activities, which can help towards future employment. Some participants have now signed up to become museum volunteers and lived-experience mentors for future participants in the project and at least one participant has signed up to start a ceramics course at Bensham Grove Pottery.





Participant feedback

“I gained a lot from the pottery, learning about different techniques in creating pottery pieces. I got a lot of peace and calmness doing it, it allowed me to switch off and focus on creating a fun pottery piece, which is now being displayed at the Shipley Art Gallery, which has given me a sense of pride and achievement.”

Community partner feedback

“We are really grateful to have the opportunity. Shipley Art Gallery has been a real gift for us and our community members.”

Dot Smith, CEO Recovery Connections

Ferens Art Gallery, Jason Wilsher-Mills: Are We There Yet?

Are We There Yet? was a high-impact exhibition with access at its heart, exploring artist Jason Wilsher-Mills' life as a working class disabled person, stories of disabled people and carers he has worked with, and his ongoing connection with Hull. A key work in the exhibition was "The Changing Places Argonaut", a mega-scale inflatable artwork highlighting the campaign for fully accessible toilets.

The gallery worked with disabled and neurodiverse artists to deliver the exhibition's public programme and developed inclusive interpretation and programming to engage with disabled communities, low-income families and non-art audiences. National and local organisations including Tourettes Hero and Sight Support helped develop interpretation and delivered engagement activities.

The gallery commissioned and acquired a new work for its collection, which took inspiration from Jason's childhood connections to East Yorkshire and the Pre-historic Roos Carr Figures in its collection. The exhibition had over 50,000 visitors and nearly 300 people participated in targeted SEND activity. The project has enabled the gallery to develop approaches and partnerships that it will embed in future programming – including implementing accessible interpretation across the museum service.





Manchester Art Gallery, Families of the World

Families of the World is a gallery initiative, with a multi-agency approach, to provide creative activities for families arriving in Manchester from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Eritrea and Sudan.

The families staying in a local hotel, particularly mothers and young children, participate in weekly art-based and artist-led sessions at the gallery, ending with a meal shared together.

The initiative was born out of the Afghan crisis of 2021, when the gallery responded within 48 hours to an approach by the council and its SureStart provision to provide recreation for families who had suddenly arrived in the city.

Since then, the need has increased, with families fleeing other conflict zones. Following a trial period, the gallery has gained funding from the Oglesby Trust to develop the activities with partners, bring other cultural venues on board and to develop an app and toolkit.

The sessions typically attract 35 to 45 family members, who say the visit to the art gallery is helping them to feel confident and adjust to a new city. Many women involved have also shared recipes for Syrian, Kurdish and Afghan meals, which are now served in the cafe. And some members volunteer to support the summer programme.



Participant feedback

“Coming to the sessions makes me so happy and relaxed. It’s so good to get out of the hotel. There is nothing to do there for me and my baby. We just sit in a room doing nothing. It makes me sad, but when I come to Families of the World, I feel happy.”

“Volunteering at Manchester Art Gallery has turned my fears into confidence. I’ve thrived in a supportive, friendly, creative, organised and non-judgemental group within a beautiful artistic environment.”

CREATING BETTER PLACES



*hortus conclusus:
the unicorn in the garden*

The medieval Unicorn tapestry, one of the most important works of the late 15th century, is a masterpiece of the Unicorn tapestry. It is a masterpiece of the Unicorn tapestry, one of the most important works of the late 15th century. It is a masterpiece of the Unicorn tapestry, one of the most important works of the late 15th century. It is a masterpiece of the Unicorn tapestry, one of the most important works of the late 15th century.



Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, Illuminating Invisible Histories: Flavours Without Borders

In partnership with the Refugee Buddy Project, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery is working on a three-year project, Illuminating Invisible Histories: Flavours Without Borders, to bring communities together and co-create meaningful programming that reflects the diverse heritage and histories of Hastings.

The project seeks to raise awareness of refugee experiences in Hastings, increase co-collaboration and co-produce programming with community organisations to broaden the museum's offer and draw in new audiences.

Two dinner parties took place at the museum, where 20 participants brought homemade food and personal objects. Through food and facilitated conversation, an intergenerational and multinational community shared untold stories of their culture, and their life in Hastings. Their insights were captured in a film screened during Refugee Week with the guests' objects displayed along with testimony about their journeys as told through their objects.

The project will continue to develop throughout 2025 with two 20-day placements by members of the community who will work with museum staff on reinterpreting the gallery's permanent display about Hastings life. New objects will be introduced, some of which may come from the dinner parties, and there will also be tours and a panel discussion.

Participant feedback

**“Inspirational
and moving.”**

**“Wonderful, engaging,
and inspiring.”**

**“Uplifting, moving,
and inspirational.”**

**“Inspiring, intense,
enlightening.”**





Perth Museum, Unicorn

When the new Perth Museum opened in 2024, the team chose to centre local LGBTQ+ stories and voices in its first exhibition, Unicorn. As part of an exploration of Scotland's national animal, the exhibition focuses on the unicorn as an LGBTQ+ symbol.

Working in collaboration with community groups, the exhibition included five newly commissioned artworks by queer Scottish artists, local objects and oral histories, a queer-friendly family space and a rich engagement programme.

Unicorn has not only increased representation of LGBTQ+ communities in the museum's displays but also in its collections by accessioning objects, artworks and oral histories generated through the exhibition.

The museum has embedded new staff training to ensure that it continues to be a welcoming and empowering place for queer workers and visitors alike.

Unicorn has been a critical and commercial success and has created a safe, relevant and celebratory space for LGBTQ+ people in Perthshire. The exhibition attracted 10,000 visitors and generated £50,000 in ticket sales in the first four months, and it also enjoyed a five-star review from the Guardian newspaper.

Through Unicorn, Perth Museum has challenged the assumption that discursive, sector-leading work can only happen in big museums and cities.



Community Partner feedback

“We were delighted to be invited for involvement in the Unicorn project at Perth Museum. We were very excited to see it launch as part of the new museum’s opening in March 2024. It was a significant step forward in LGBTQ+ development in Perth and Kinross, and the exhibition was eye-catching and impactful. We truly value the joint approach when we work with LGBTQ+ groups and organisations across the region, and further around Scotland, and this collaborative approach has resulted in many positive steps for everyone involved. We certainly felt that Unicorn was one of these positives and it has really helped to further awareness and impact of LGBTQ+ matters. Plenty of evidence that our charity has equally become recognised as one for resources, support and community as a result.”

Matt Wester,
Board Member and Trustee for Rainbow Heartlands LGBTQ+,
a local LGBTQ+ charity in Perth and Kinross

Birmingham Museums Trust, Citizens Jury

In October 2024, Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) commenced its Citizens' Jury – the first for a museum in the UK, and one of the first globally. As part of BMT's broader transformation strategy aiming to reinvent the city's museums as genuinely democratic and inclusive spaces, the Citizens' Jury model has proven successful in addressing complex issues and driving meaningful change.

5,000 invites were sent out across Birmingham asking people to take part and the Jury was then selected to match the key demographics of the city.

The Jurors heard from commentators on topics they chose, on themes ranging from the organisation's finances to the wider cultural sector, to help answer the central questions: 'what does Birmingham need and want from its museums, now and in the future' and 'what should Birmingham Museums Trust do to make these things happen'?

Their answer – alongside a compelling statement on their experience, which spoke of renewed pride in the city – was 10 roles for the museum service and 20 recommendations for action that addressed championing diversity and representing everyday lives, as well as tackling divisive topics and contributing

to the economy. The jury shared these at a stakeholder event they planned themselves and via a published report.

At the start of the process around 80% of the Jurors felt museums were not for them, not good value for money and had no relevance. By the end of the process Jurors had not only become museum visitors but were asking for more. Jurors are continuing to work with the Trust; advocating for it and asking to speak to funders, politicians and the press, to explain the value of museums and the need for investment.



Jury feedback

“I didn’t know what to expect when I got the leaflet... but I’ve come here and it has changed my mind I thought it’s old, boring, not worth going, however by seeing it, it has changed my mind and it has made me change my opinions.”

“I’m really hopefully about the future of Brum, I feel really happy that this has taken place. I’ve got so much Brum pride and it’s only growing through this process. I’m really hopeful that other people can see how amazing Brum is because of this.”



Museum of Free Derry, Conflict and Legacy Interpretive Network

The Conflict and Legacy Interpretive Network was initiated by the Museum of Free Derry, National Museums Northern Ireland and Healing Through Remembering, creating a network of museums and heritage organisations specifically covering conflict and legacy issues related to the conflict in or about Ireland.

As the debate around the historical legacy of the conflict continues, museums and heritage organisations need to consider their role and purpose. To date the project has brought together 19 different organisations from across the political divide and created a space where these organisations, from vastly different and sometimes completely opposing backgrounds, can use their collections and venues to work together with each other's audiences to help inform and educate around the legacy debate.

The first important outcome was the creation of the network itself, which has brought together organisations of all sizes and all shades of opinion. A second outcome has been the employment of a staff member and the creation of a digital presence for the network. Via its website, visitors can learn about the network members and see a digital exhibition of their work. The network is now also working towards a physical exhibition.



Community Partner feedback

“Decorum NI is very pleased to be involved with the CLIN initiative. It provides a neutral and non-judgemental platform on which different perspectives and narratives of the Conflict can be juxtaposed and thus help to create better learning and understanding- especially for future generations. It is a very welcome opportunity to tell our story in context, something we have not been able to do elsewhere.”

Decorum

“Given the history and current situation in North/ern Ireland, the establishment of CLIN addresses the challenge of how we address the conflicted past in a contested present. With no official, state-sanctioned, legacy body yet in operation, CLIN has provided an excellent network of groups, ideas and practices that have influenced our own project, the Prisons Memory Archive. We highly value being part of a network that is inclusive in all of its parts, practices and policies.”

Prisons Memory Archive



Monlife Museums 2023–2025

Monlife Museums’ work from 2023–2025 prioritised anti-racism and community involvement of minority groups across all three museum sites.

Our National Lottery Heritage Funded Project Dynamic Collections: Opening the Box, engaged over 60 people from diverse communities in Monmouthshire including multicultural communities, the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities, migrant communities and Ukrainian refugees. The museum invited them to share their opinions and stories about Monmouth and to select objects from the museum’s collection for display. They wrote personal stories around their reasons for choosing their objects and what Monmouth story it tells for them. This resulted in two exhibitions: both under the title ‘What makes Monmouth, Monmouth’, one in the Shire Hall Museum and a second that toured different local venues. This involved a variety of venues including the leisure centre, library, schools and community centres and brought the museum out to the public,

engaging new audiences. We ran activities and created resources for schools to go alongside the touring exhibition in the different venues. We involved people in museum cataloguing and ran focus groups with diverse communities on what terminology and information should be included when cataloguing items linked to LGBTQIA+, multicultural and disability histories. We now have language guides for staff and volunteers and forms to help us collect additional essential information when accepting new items with links to these communities.

A second project, funded by Welsh Government to further the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, enabled us to install a new permanent gallery and two permanent cases. At Chepstow Museum the new gallery focuses on migration stories to Chepstow. It includes a video made by the Ukrainian community on their life in Chepstow. In Abergavenny Museum, we commissioned a video from the National Archives in Dominica about the Rosalie Community, a former

plantation with links to Abergavenny. We also facilitated conversations with local multicultural groups resulting in an exhibition and two permanent cases for local communities to curate their

own displays. Front of House staff were trained to support these exhibitions and the first launched with a display of items from a multicultural wedding in Abergavenny.



INSPIRING ENGAGEMENT, DEBATE AND REFLECTION



National Museums Liverpool, Carving Out Truths: Sculpture and Slavery, Walker Art Gallery

Carving Out Truths: Sculpture and Slavery was a co-curated project working with young people from Liverpool's Black and Global Ethnic Majority communities, who are typically underrepresented and misrepresented within museums. The programme empowered them to research and share histories related to slavery, colonialism and empire linked to the Walker Art Gallery's neoclassical sculpture collection.

Neoclassical sculpture emerged in the early 18th century alongside the rapidly expanding British Empire. Public monuments depicting Britain's so-called 'heroes' were erected across the country, paid for by local merchants whose wealth was made from trading enslaved African people and the goods they produced. The histories of these sculptures was researched collaboratively through workshops and talks supported by artists, curators, educators, historians and activists.

Through the sharing of knowledge and lived experience, this project produced a series of interventions in the galleries drawing attention to individuals and stories that were previously excluded, creating a space for learning, dialogue and recovery. Carving Out Truths involved 35 collaborators and has been seen by more than 60,000 people, challenging established narratives in art history that continue to uphold silenced racial biases in the wake of British slavery.



“This project has given me a progressive outlook on Black women’s position in society today. My intervention draws attention to Phillis Wheatley, a Black Christian poet who was persecuted because of her gender and heritage. Nearly 300 years later, I, a Black Christian poet, have the platform to celebrate her life and work, and to voice these silenced histories through the Carving Out Truths project. This work reveals the depths and the richness of history which I was honoured to be part of.”

Karen Maina,
community group member



National Museums Northern Ireland, Global Voices Local Choices

The Global Voices, Local Choices programme was conceived as a response to growing calls for cultural institutions to address decolonisation, take a stand against racism, and challenge exclusionary practices. Six museums across Northern Ireland joined together with community partners and committed to make a long-term positive difference to people's lives. Over the course of the project we empowered marginalised communities from nearly 40 different cultures to engage with the World Cultures collections and influence how they are shared and interpreted.

In the programme's aftermath, museums have led new inclusive initiatives, and sharing personal stories and related objects has created a growing sense of belonging in communities. For example, the Armagh Robinson Library, which was a partner in the original programme has recently finished its third project with Ukrainian refugees that they met at the beginning of the programme. And a recent donation to the Ulster Museum by Diverse Youth NI, of an artwork depicting Frederick Douglass, shows confidence in sharing relevant stories, positioning museums as unique, inclusive, and welcoming spaces.

Some marginalised communities are now keen to involve museums in their fight for social justice. The African Caribbean Support Organisation has invited museums to participate in conferences about equality and anti-racism, demonstrating that museums have become relevant and trusted collaborators.

The community partners and museums continue to convene quarterly as a supportive network to explore new ways to embed decolonial practices in

their work. Supporting Decolonisation in Northern Ireland offers valuable guidance and has been widely shared. For National Museums NI, the establishment of a dedicated Assistant Curator for Inclusive Global Histories role reinforces their long-term commitment to decolonisation.

The key takeaways are that the programme's community engagement presented new ways for collections to be understood and celebrated. Lasting relations and connections have been established and the commitment to diversity in museums has been reinforced.





Salisbury Museum, Fashioning Our World

Fashioning Our World worked with young people (aged 11-25) to discover the hidden stories of sustainability told by clothes and accessories from the past. The young people explored items from the Salisbury Museum fashion collection and learnt practical skills to repair and repurpose items in their own wardrobe.

The young people shared these powerful stories with the community, aiming to change people's attitudes to fashion and help fight the climate crisis. They organised events including a sustainable fashion show, for which they made their own outfits by repurposing and using recycled materials. They also co-curated an exhibition at Salisbury Museum, attracting 6,851 visitors. It told the stories of clothes and accessories that have been repurposed, mended and loved in the past, and asked: 'Can this inspire us to think differently about fashion in the future?'

The project created a model that can be used by other museums and heritage organisations with fashion collections and worked in partnership with Dorset Museum to trial this. The initiative trained 44 volunteers and a further nine from Salisbury Museum and four from Dorset Museum have researched the fashion collections, helped with events, workshops and the exhibition, and passed on skills to young people.



Participant feedback

“I like everything about the panels, we all worked together to produce every aspect of them and they’ve turned out cohesive and unusually appealing. It’s nice to see your own work on display.”

“Honestly, it feels amazing to see my ideas being used to educate people on the history of fashion!”

“Fun and relaxed sessions, flexible and supportive for a range of abilities. Young people had fun and enjoyed creating. Activities were enjoyable and the young people felt able to participate without fear of not being able to do things.”

Youth Action Wiltshire
(who work with young people with caring responsibilities)

Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales, Anti-racism

The Museum Association's Anti-racist Museums programme has been transformational for Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales.

In Wales we are incredibly fortunate to operate in a political context that enables this work, with groundbreaking legislation like the [Anti-racist Wales Action Plan](#) paving the way to make Wales an anti-racist country.

In 2020 in partnership with Arts Council Wales, we commissioned a set of Widening Engagement reports. From these we jointly produced an action plan which outlined our commitments to make change and do better.

So, for some time now we have been taking steps towards becoming an anti-racist organisation. This has included work with our communities to decolonise the National Collection, looking at our interpretation to create balanced, authentic and decolonised narratives and working collaboratively to develop and deliver programming that is more representative and inclusive.

As part of this work, we launched [Perspective\(s\)](#) a collaboration with Arts Council Wales, Arts organisations and seven creative professionals, to create

Anti-racist and decolonial interventions at each of the seven Amgueddfa Cymru museums across Wales and at arts venues, bringing collections and narratives that were previously hidden or marginalized to the forefront through displays, installations, films, events, symposia and celebrations.

The fundamentals of addressing our institutional issues needs strategic oversight that is grounded in the learning, and un-learning, of Anti-racism.

This is where the Anti-Racist Museums training comes in, with five members of our leadership team joining the cohort. It created a space for reflection and dialogue, challenged us, taught us new meta skills and reconnected us with our emotions as leaders – helping us to understand their importance in this work. We now have a new starting point for this work, challenging embedded whiteness. We are using our meta skills to disrupt and are reimagining how power can be shared, with programmes like Perspective(s) enabling us to move our learning into action.

A key outcome for us has been learning alongside and from the experience of other museums. This has naturally formed a coalition of museums committed to not only their own Anti-racist journeys but moreover building of a truly Anti-racist sector together.

OUR RESOURCES FOR SOCIALLY ENGAGED PRACTICE

- [Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund](#)
- [Health and Wellbeing in Museums Fund](#)
- [Measuring Socially Engaged Practice – A Toolkit for Museums](#)
- [Museums Change Lives Awards](#)
- [Online courses and careers support](#)
- [Power to the People – A Framework for Participatory Practice](#)
- [Supporting Decolonisation in Museum](#)
- [Wellbeing Hub](#)
- [Working Equitably – A Toolkit for Museums and Community Organisations](#)

MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES

Image credits

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National Museums NI; Fashioning Our World,
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#MuseumsChangeLives

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